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... Emblem of the Governing Class

Alger Hiss spent 44 months in prison and then his remaining 42 years in the dungeon of his grotesque fidelity to the fiction of his innocence. The costs of his unconditional surrender to the totalitarian temptation was steep for his supporters. Clinging to their belief in his martyrdom in order to preserve their belief in their "progressive" virtue, they were drawn into an intellectual corruption that hastened the moral bankruptcy of the American left.

Hiss died last week at 92. The insufferable agnosticism expressed in many obituaries concerning his guilt is proof of the continuing queasiness of "anti-anti-communist" thinkers confronting the facts of communism and its servants.

When Hiss was accused of espionage for the Soviet Union, his background—Johns Hopkins and Harvard Law School; protege of Felix Frankfurter; aide to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes; a diplomatic career that carried him to the upper reaches of the State Department, and to Yalta and the United Nations' birth in San Francisco; at the time of the accusation, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—made him a perfect symbol of cosmopolitan sophistication under siege from America's paranoid majority of yahoos. And then there was his accuser, Whittaker Chambers.

Porcine, rumped and tormented, with bad teeth and a worse tailor, he was as declassé as Hiss was elegantly emblematic of the governing class. The trouble was that Chambers knew things. He knew Hiss.

When Chambers said that while he had been a communist operative he had dealt with Hiss, Hiss testified that

he had never known "a man by the name of Whittaker Chambers." A very lawyerly answer, that. During his protracted self-destruction, he was driven to admit to having known Chambers by another name, but not well. However, Chambers knew so many intimacies—from Hiss's household effects to the thrill Hiss, an amateur ornithologist, felt when he spotted a prothonotary warbler—that Hiss was forced to weave an ever more tangled web.

He lied about transferring his car through Chambers to communists, and about not remembering how he had disposed of the Woodstock typewriter on which some incriminating documents had been typed. He lied by omitting from a list of former maids the one to whose family he gave the typewriter. He was convicted of perjury (the statute of limitations saved him from espionage charges).

In 1978 historian Allen Weinstein, who began his research believing Hiss innocent, published his definitive "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case," based on 40,000 pages of previously classified material and interviews with 40 people involved in the case but never before interviewed, including Soviet agents who confirmed Chambers's testimony. Weinstein's conclusion: "There has yet to emerge, from any source, a coherent body of evidence that seriously undermines the credibility of the evidence against Mr. Hiss."

What emerged after the end of the Cold War would have made peace hell for Hiss, had he been susceptible to guilt or even embarrassment. A Soviet general, falsely described as familiar with all pertinent archives, was pressured by a Hiss emissary to say there

was no evidence of Hiss espionage. The general later recanted. From Russia came documents confirming Chambers's account of the communist underground in the United States in the 1930s. From Hungarian archives came documentary evidence (from another Harvard-educated American spy) that Hiss spied.

In a 1990 memoir, a former KGB officer asserted that Hiss's Soviet code name was "Ales." Earlier this year, the U.S. government released files from the "Venona Project," which intercepted 2,200 wartime Soviet cables. A March 30, 1945, cable refers to an agent Ales in terms congruent with testimony about Hiss by Chambers and others.

There is no hatred as corrupting as intellectual hatred, so Hiss's supporters always responded to evidence by redoubling their concoction of rococo reasons for believing him framed by a conspiracy so vast and proficient it left no trace of itself. They still require his innocence so they can convict America of pathological injustice. Never has so much ingenuity been invested in so low a cause, or such futility.

Hiss loyalists finally were reduced to proclaiming that their loyalty was self-vindicating. As one of them said, "Alger would not have put his friends and others through what they went through for him if he was guilty." That is, he was either innocent or a moral monster, which is unthinkable. No, indubitable. He, enveloped in his enigmatic fanaticism, and they, impervious to evidence, were all monstrosities, huddled together for warmth in what G. K. Chesterton called "the clean well-lit prison of one idea."